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SUBJECT: TO ROCK OR NOT TO ROCK?

REF: 04 Minsk 1189

Summary

¶1. Following a banned rock concert November 14, several blacklisted rock musicians met with Chief State Ideology Officer and Deputy Head of the Presidential Administration Oleg Proleskovskiy November 21. Proleskovskiy acknowledged the alleged ban, committed to lifting it, and encouraged the musicians to refrain from participating in opposition events. The visit raised heated debate in internet and print media. Few voices overtly welcomed the meeting. The musicians mostly were criticized for betraying their audience, following GOB orders, and becoming supporters of the regime. The diverse reaction suggests the GOB may offer dialogue as a means to further divide civil society. While the talks occurred three weeks ago, the Presidential Administration has yet to cancel the ban. End Summary

Make Music Not Politics

¶2. On November 14, 2007, BKGB officers reportedly annulled permission for a rock concert at a nightclub. The action came after authorities had recently lightened up on a de facto ban preventing a number of rock bands and singers from legally performing in Belarus.

To clarify the situation, rock musicians Pete Paulau, Lyavon Volski, Alyaksandr Kullinkovich, Ihar Varashkevich, and folk musician Aleh Hamenka accepted Proleskovskiy's invitation to meet and speak at a press conference November 23 following the meeting. According to Paulau, Proleskovskiy apologized for the unwritten ban, committed to dialogue, and noted President Lukashenko had sanctioned the meeting. Kullinkovich called Proleskovskiy "an acceptable person" who welcomed and respected the musicians' opinions. He described the regime as "bloody" and was surprised the official made no attempts to "shut him up."

¶3. The musicians reportedly rejected Proleskovskiy's offer to participate in the concert "Rock for Belarus" to be aired on state-owned television. Volski emphasized they neither talked politics nor concluded an agreement; however, Proleskovskiy recommended that they not play at opposition events. The musicians emphasized that as common citizens they did not support the regime, but never expressed their opposition in their lyrics. Hamenka noted they also touched upon broader issues of modern Belarusian culture at the meeting. He underlined that the musicians are "creators" not "politicians" and only engage in "cultural politics." Despite expressed skepticism about the meeting's possible outcome, Paulau maintained the GOB was ready to compromise. He also admitted they could have been called "to be used" but made no steps forward to change their perspectives and beliefs.

¶4. Paulau also participated in a roundtable November 27 to discuss modern music and "ways to survive" organized by the pro-presidential newspaper "Sovietskaya Belarus." He again reiterated that the

system worked against certain musicians preventing them from earning a living. Paulau noted he did not ask for help from the GOB and expected no hindrance. The only place available to rent for his band to play is a 60-person nightclub in central Minsk. Nevertheless, the band would gather up to 6,000 fans if it were not blacklisted.

Is Rock-n-Roll Dead?

¶15. The musicians' meeting with a top GOB official continues to raise heated public debate and fierce criticism. Many prominent artists and civil society leaders lashed out at them. Opposition Free Theater Director Nikolay Khalezin called the meeting "amoral" and the musicians "weak" for seeking the GOB's favor and funding. Renowned rock singer Kasya Kamotskaya suggested it was "a cat-and-mouse dialogue" and said politicians should be responsible for negotiating with the GOB. Freelance journalist and human rights advocate Irina Khalip vehemently criticized the meeting with Proleskovskiy in an internet article entitled "Rock-n-Roll is Dead." Khalip claimed the musicians went for "grub" and "crumbs," betrayed their fans, and lost respect for their courage and civic stands. She maintained the musicians failed to defend the rights of banned rock groups and to put forward political claims for the release of prisoners of conscience. Music critic Maksim Zhabkov sarcastically noted the meeting served as a search for a new business partner not "a political demobilization" of rockers who "simply scanned the market."

Supporters Protest Reasonableness of Rock Musicians

¶16. A few ardent supporters of the rock musicians welcomed the meeting with Proleskovskiy as a step toward mutual understanding and a sign of "reasonable pragmatism." Rock concert promoter Vitaliy

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Supranovich elaborated that the GOB should perceive dissident musicians as their citizens, and "we should accept them as our government." He defended the "terrorized" musicians saying it was impossible to take a neutral stand in dictatorial Belarus whether in the opposition or pro-regime camp. Prominent poet Genadz Buraukin urged against hasty conclusions and expressed trust in the musicians taking steps beneficial for Belarus and its culture. Acclaimed playwright Andrey Kureichik supported the musicians saying they managed to "rise above foolish politicians and their shallow interests." Kureichik praised the possible lifting of the ban and called it "the first step to rock music revival."

Comment

¶17. Securing the loyalty of rock bands has been on the minds of apparatchiks throughout the CIS since Ukraine's "Orange Revolution" when ethno-pop star and Eurovision Song Contest Champion Ruslana performed at opposition demonstrations. Russian officials sought "detente" with their rockers in March 2005 and Belarusian officials hoped for the same in organizing this meeting. Some officials say superiors praised Proleskovskiy for the meeting and suggested that the musicians would no longer play "at the U.S. Ambassador's residence for hours." [Note: This refers to the independent music festival sponsored by the Embassy and held this September at the EMR. End note.] Some Minsk pundits labeled the Belarusian musicians "beggars" who fundamentally "adjusted" political views to suit GOB needs. In addition, a vehement discussion on the suitability of dialogue with the GOB divided dissidents into two camps.

¶18. Comment cont. Unfortunately, while the musicians emphasized the fact that they did not concede to GOB offers, they also failed to identify clearly the purposes of their visit to the Presidential Administration. Except for invitations to take part in state TV Christmas shows, the black list remains in place and most doubt that it will be lifted anytime soon. This is a cautionary tale for those who support dialogue with the GOB for its own sake, without clear demands. End comment.

Stewart